

The Cambodia Example

UN Peacekeeping Operations and Intelligence (U)

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Of the many aspects of peacekeeping, the subject of intelligence and military information remains the least explored because of the UN's long-held principles of neutrality and transparency.¹ Yet intelligence can play a critical role, particularly if it is tailored to the specific aims and objectives of a peacekeeping, peace-building, or peace-enforcement operation. Like other principles of UN peacekeeping (preventive diplomacy, preplanning, early deployment of staff and resources, clear and achievable goals, and exit strategies), it requires management and coordination. If the goal is to institutionalize intelligence support to peacekeeping operations, then traditional suspicions about its use and delivery will have to be overcome.

In 1991, as an Australian Army captain, I was fortunate to participate in the planning for the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) and subsequently the implementation of UNTAC's mandate. For two years, I worked in Cambodia. I then went on to doctoral studies in peacekeeping with a focus on the Cambodia operation. Academic studies have enabled me to place my hands-on experience in a wider context.

The UNTAC Operation

The UNTAC operation ran from 1991 to 1993. At the time, it was the biggest operation conducted in the post-Cold War period. It probably remains the most complex operation in terms of the role and responsibilities

accorded to the UN. After a prolonged negotiation period through the 1980s, the Paris Peace Agreements were signed on 23 October 1991 by 18 countries and the four Cambodian parties—the incumbent Cambodia People's Party (CPP) installed by Vietnam in 1979; the Royalist party, FUNCINPEC,² which drew popular support from its association with Prince Sihanouk; the Kampuchean People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) associated with the 1970-75 Lon Nol regime; and the Party of Democratic Kampuchea (PDK)—the Khmer Rouge.

The situation in Cambodia was complex. The country had been at war from 1970 to 1991. On the surface, it was an international conflict involving Vietnam and Cambodia, but underlying this interstate conflict was the conflict between the Khmer and Vietnamese Communist Parties, the conflict between the Khmer and Vietnamese peoples, and the conflict between China and Vietnam.³ Further complications involved the traditional animosity between Thailand and Vietnam and the relationship between the USSR and China manifest in the competing strategies in Southeast Asia.

The Paris Agreements called for a UN intervention force to oversee the administration of all four factions through a transition to elections conducted by the UN. Khmer sovereignty would reside in a body called the Supreme National Council (SNC) composed of eminent faction representatives, with Prince Sihanouk as President.

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The strategic objective of UNTAC was the establishment of a sovereign, independent, neutral, and non-aligned Cambodia that posed no threat to its neighbors. This was seen as the only viable alternative for lasting peace and political stability in Southeast Asia. Other alternatives, be it a Chinese- or Vietnam-dominated Cambodia, would not bring peace and political stability to the region—nor would they be acceptable to ASEAN.⁴

A Full Plate

The major activities for the mission were deployment, regroupment, cantonment, and disarmament of the faction armies; the repatriation of 380,000 refugees from the Thailand-Cambodia border; and the election process. For the main operation, the UNTAC military component was responsible for the regroupment and cantonment of 156,000 troops; disarming some 350,000 soldiers, including militia; and securing and guarding 300,000 weapons and 80-million rounds of ammunition. This was to occur in the context of broader UN responsibilities for the security of the borders and territorial waters of Cambodia; the resettlement of over 500,000 people, including the refugees, demobilized soldiers, and internally displaced people; and the conduct of a nationwide election. All this was to happen while the UN accepted responsibility for much of the higher administration of the state.

The military mandate also included verifying the withdrawal of foreign forces and the cessation of military assistance to the parties. There are similarities, by design or default, between UNTAC's military mandate

and the provisions of earlier agreements in Southeast Asia—the 1954 Paris Agreements, the 1962 Agreements on Laos, and the 1973 Paris Agreements.⁵

This long view of the development of the 1991 Paris Agreements retains validity when one considers the immutability of Cambodian leaders, even through turbulent regime change. All the faction leaders in Cambodia during UNTAC had their formative political experiences through the dynamics of 1954, 1962 and 1973. It also highlights Cambodia's interconnection with regional stability, with Cambodia sitting on a geopolitical faultline and with its sovereignty underwritten by foreign intervention or foreign patronage, which all Cambodian politicians have been obliged to accept at one time or another. That is, the Cambodians knew what the Agreements meant, they understood the fragility of the international community, they wanted the UN to intervene, and they built their strategies around the UN intervention, hoping to use the UN to their advantage. This was fine while UNTAC was doing what the factions wanted. But when UNTAC did not, the situation changed.

While a sound framework agreed to by all the parties is a solid foundation on which to commence implementation of the mandate, it has to be recognized that the Agreements generated their own dynamics and catalyzed military activity after they were signed and during the UNTAC mandate.⁶

Even though UNTAC maintained its neutrality as best it could under the circumstances, one observer wondered how the traditional UN role as an impartial observer or mediator could be reconciled with a new position as

the implementor of treaties and agreements or as the legislator or judge.⁷

As part of the political process UNTAC was also part of the balance of forces, which each faction had to consider in its strategies. UNTAC thus became a fifth faction by default.

Part of the Problem

Even in a less demanding role, the UN will find it difficult to remain aloof from this problem. The first traffic accident or the first display of cultural insensitivity, be it troops visiting brothels or a less obvious transgression of local mores, will undermine the moral authority which the UN Charter provides to peacekeepers. I call this the fifth faction syndrome.

In peacbuilding operations, this is not a question of if it will happen but when. The clock starts ticking from the moment UN troops arrive. Peacebuilders have a limited timespan before they become part of the problem.

Helping Hold Elections

When the Khmer Rouge withdrew from the cantonment and disarmament phase in June 1992, the main objectives of the UNTAC military component changed from cantonment and disarmament to protection of the election process. This catalyzed a redeployment within Cambodia along electoral boundaries and brought the electoral and military components together. A unity of mission was achieved in this act. Slowly, but surely, UNTAC began to gain the confidence of the Cambodian people and to draw their support away from the various factions.

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During the months of voter registration through the conduct of the elections, the Khmer Rouge did everything they could to disrupt UNTAC's activities. UNTAC also came under attack from the incumbent administration, the CPP, which, concerned at its loss of support, began a political intimidation campaign against the other political parties and a disinformation campaign against UNTAC. It also included physical attacks on the UN. Fear spread throughout Cambodia, and in the leadup to elections there was a lot of pessimism that the polling stations would be attacked.

In response to these fears, UNTAC decreased the number of polling sites from 1,900 to 1,400, signed agreements with the participating factions to help safeguard the sites, and convinced the people that their votes would be secret. These actions are the main reason why the elections were a success, with 90 percent of registered voters able to cast their ballots in May 1993.

The EP-5

For strategy and policy, UNTAC was well served from the beginning by the presence of the Extended Permanent Five (EP-5) in Phnom Penh. This group formed around the Security Council ambassadors, and it expanded to include representation from Australia, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Thailand, India, and Malaysia. The EP-5 paralleled the Core Group in New York and ensured that Security Council resolutions were in tune with the situation on the ground. This complimented the link between the UNTAC chiefs and New York. The EP-5 also provided information on an informal basis to UNTAC.

The importance of this link cannot be overemphasized. The presence and contributions of the EP-5 reinforced the polypartisan nature of the mission. In particular, Russia, China, France, and the United States provided information throughout the mission to UNTAC—information which was valuable in selecting courses of action for the way ahead, particularly when the Khmer Rouge withdrew from cantonment. This arrangement coalesced the mission at the strategic level, and it is to be counted as one of the strengths of the UNTAC operation and a minimum requirement for similar missions of the future.

The Operational Level

UNTAC was less well served at the operational level. First, UNTAC had no formal intelligence structure.⁸ UN troops arriving in Cambodia depended on briefings they had received at their point of origin for information. UN military observers had to deploy to sites, sometimes with only a day of briefings as preparation.

While far from satisfactory, the fact was that in-country conditions varied considerably. Also, the situational awareness of incoming troops grew exponentially on arrival in Cambodia in comparison to that of home-country analysts.

UNTAC established a military information cell, but it did not produce the first distributed summary until

15 June 1992, eight months after the Agreements were signed. The cell was led by a French officer with a US deputy. Beneath them, there were Indian, Indonesian, and British officers, not all with formal intelligence training. There was no formal link for military information between Phnom Penh and New York until April 1993, when UNTAC officers deployed to the newly constituted Situation Center, with the role of passing information to the Department of Peacekeeping operations as required.⁹

Initially, the UNTAC cell members had no baseline for what constituted significant military activity. They did not know what the original demarcation lines between the factions were, and no one had a real grasp of the military capabilities of the factions nor their intent. This was not entirely their fault—no intelligence service had a thorough understanding of the capabilities of the Khmer Rouge before the UNTAC mission was set up.

There were no formal arrangements for the receipt of satellite imagery nor for SIGINT. Given that fighting was predominantly conducted at a low level with small arms, these tools were arguably unsuitable for the majority of the time, but nonetheless they provided collateral information.

The onus fell on field officers to observe and report what was happening in their areas. The fact that the UNTAC military component comprised 16,000 troops from 34 different countries meant that reports were varied and erratic in content and style, an inherent problem aggravated by the turnover of contingents and personnel for the duration of the mandate.

The military information cell was fed reports from the 450 UN military observers deployed throughout Cambodia and from the battalions that ran the nine sectors into which Cambodia had been divided. Some battalions maintained military information cells at the sector headquarters alongside military observers, but others did not.

The military information branch gradually improved its capability. By the end of 1992, it was able to exploit information provided by Khmer Rouge rank and file who had deserted. While generally good, the information it provided was four to six weeks behind the situation.

There was no procedure to receive information from political meetings, from that volunteered by the diplomatic corps, and from information related to activities in Thailand and Vietnam which had a bearing on the UNTAC mandate. Consequently, there was little cross-pollination between UNTAC's civilian political analysts and the military. Contacts were initiated on a personal rather than a systemic basis. When a particular officer was away, information was not exchanged.

The main disadvantage was the consequent failure to pick up the correlation between political changes and military activity. For example, Security Council resolutions often catalyzed military activity, as did deliberations of the SNC. Political deadlines or key timelines in the UNTAC schedule were also catalysts for faction activity. The connection was often missed by the military information branch and the political officers.

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Other UNTAC Information Managers

Parallel to the military information branch were a number of other organizations responsible for managing information, all in locations separate from the military information branch. Within the military component, there were the Strategic Information Teams (SITs). The SITs were concerned with investigating allegations of the presence of foreign forces in Cambodia. They acted on information provided by the factions. They were staffed by more senior officers, were attuned to the political sensitivity of their task, and typically produced high-quality reports.

The Mixed Military Working Group, responsible for maintaining liaison with the factions, also produced reports on faction intentions throughout the mandate.

External Organizations

Not counting the Press Office, which managed UNTAC's external audience and was attached to the Office of the Special Representative, there were five organizations external to the military that handled mission-sensitive information: the information cell of the Civilian Police Component; the Human Rights Component involved in investigations of human rights abuses; the Electoral Component, which received reports from its electoral staff deployed down to district level;

the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR); and the Information and Education Division (INFO/ED).

INFO/ED was one of the great innovations of the UNTAC mission. Its main task was to inform Cambodians about the Paris Agreements and about UNTAC's role and objectives and to provide the production and broadcasting facilities to spread voter education. It also was responsible for broadcasting the platforms and messages of the competing political parties.

A vital aspect was the link INFO/ED established between UNTAC and the grass roots of Cambodian society, predominantly an oral culture and for whom radio was the key medium. There is no doubt that Radio UNTAC, by emphasizing the secret ballot, convinced many Cambodians to register and to vote.¹⁰

A more critical part of INFO/ED was the analysis section. It brought together scholars of Cambodia from across the globe who spoke Khmer, Chinese, and Vietnamese. This team was able to conduct research throughout Cambodia and to verify the penetration of UNTAC's message, to assess UNTAC's image and credibility, and to explain Cambodia to the senior staff. The analysis gave UNTAC the depth and experience it needed in understanding Cambodian culture, its geopolitical importance, and, more important, it could indicate where UNTAC was going wrong.

If bureaucracies have a tendency to reward "yes" men, then INFO/ED analysis section were the "no" men and "no" women of the mission. Understandably, it was not a popular

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section. Its service was nonetheless critical for UNTAC. It had the expertise to detail motive and intent of the factions through the experience of its scholars. Its one shortfall was that it did not have the expertise to assess military capabilities. Conversely, the military was not equipped to assess motive and intent.

At the operational level, UNTAC's management of information was not strong. Its inability to draw information from the field and integrate it with strategic and political information to produce operationally specific intelligence was a major weakness.

Coordination of Information

The solution seems simple. If UNTAC could merge the databases of INFO/ED and all other components, then one would expect a coherent picture to emerge from the evidence. But this did not happen. During 1993, when violent incidents were endemic, it was critical to work out what had happened and who was responsible. The system was described by an SIT investigator as follows:

- An apparently politically motivated killing occurs.
- The local civilian police starts an immediate investigation.
- The local UN military observer team, concerned about all events in its area, conducts its own inquiries.
- The local human rights representative decides that the incident has human rights implications and commences investigation.

- The local electoral component gets involved because it has implications for free and fair elections.
- Because the incident has appeared on local TV, the INFO/ED component gets involved to ensure fair media representation.
- It is decided that the case has similarities to other cases elsewhere in the country, and a SIT team is dispatched to check if it is part of a trend.
- The civil administration component that runs a database for all cases of political intimidation and violence considers the incident serious enough to send an investigative officer.

This scenario was a reality for many investigations. The duplication of effort and the confusion generated by any number of reports slowed the decisionmaking cycle, and the ill will that it generated caused some components to refuse to divulge their specific reports.

Spreading Confusion and Fear

Ultimately, military activity was inseparable from the political landscape, yet it was being considered in isolation.

When the military information branch took the initiative in early 1993 to convene meetings with all branches involved in assessments,

there was a bewildering array of competing hypothesis about what was going on in Cambodia. Rather than analyzing the intent and capability of threats to the mission, each component put forward its own holistic analysis.

The picture became more confused during the election campaign, when the Khmer Rouge and the CPP conducted attacks and disinformation campaigns, and UNTAC started taking casualties. While information made its way to the top where executive decisions were made, the inherent communications problems within the UN meant that a coherent picture was not disseminated to the troops and civilians on the ground.

The competing hypothesis of the information management group contributed to the confusion. The murder of a Japanese district electoral supervisor in April 1993 led to a crisis in confidence among the civilian field staff, who in their electoral capacity were on the frontline. Some 40 electoral staff resigned after the murder, and the head of the UN volunteers in Geneva phoned the field staff six weeks before the election, with the message that, if one more UN volunteer was killed, they all would be withdrawn.¹¹ That no more were killed reflected the increased security arrangements made between the military and the electoral staff. UN staff were withdrawn at night into military compounds in the worst affected areas. As a result, there was a reduction in information, when it was needed the most.

UN personnel began to feel vulnerable, and fear spread throughout Cambodia. The period leading up to the elections was rife with rumor and disinformation. Into this vortex

stepped a number of overnight experts, who predicted doom and gloom.

The currency of truth had been debased. In this environment, any assessment that did not identify its information source was just speculation, another hypothesis to be added to the rest of the theories.

Assumptions, Observations, and Recommendations

The lessons of my UNTAC experience in Cambodia in relation to intelligence give rise to several assumptions, observations, and recommendations. The first assumption is that the UN is not going to develop its own intelligence capability in the near future. Second, the UN Charter and its principles will not change. That means that multinational coalitions and multinational representation at all levels will be encouraged and demanded. This means that SIGINT and satellite imagery will continue to be provided on an ad hoc basis to Chapter VI operations (peaceful settlement of disputes) and through national means to Chapter VII operations (peace enforcement actions).

The first observation is that the moral authority invested in UN operations by the UN Charter has steadily eroded over time. The longer you are there, the more tenuous your position; the fifth faction syndrome will affect all UN operations. The second observation is that in crisis periods providing intelligence without identifying the source is akin to speculation, and it becomes another hypothesis.

Strategically, the key is in the field. New York is a long way from Africa or Cambodia. The Security Council has to be represented in the field and preferably extended to include concerned nations. SIGINT and satellite imagery can be delivered via the EP-5 representatives. More important, they maintain the links to the Security Council and assist in drafting resolutions that meet the aims of the mission.

At the operational level, UN operations require their own radio stations to maintain links to the grass roots. Country experts are required to assess the penetration of the UN message, credibility, and image. Baselines should be developed for faction military activity before deployment, if possible.

With the goal of institutionalizing intelligence in UN operations, I recommend that a peacekeeping information template be developed that addresses wider indicators and warnings specific to a mission. For example, the template could cover such issues as:

- Postagreement dynamics.
- The impact of Security Council resolutions.
- Faction propaganda and disinformation campaigns.
- The fifth faction syndrome.

Finally, the key recommendation is that information has to be coordinated at the operational level. UN reform is leaning toward delegating administrative, operational, and financial authority to the field. Information also should be included.

The creation of an analysis and plans cell at the deputy head of mission level could be the dropoff and capture point for all sensitive information related to the mission. It is here that the components correlate the political picture with the military and the field picture, creating a coherent awareness of the situation.

NOTES

1. For a discussion as to why this is so, see Hugh Smith, "Intelligence and UN Peacekeeping," *Survival*, 36/3 autumn, 1994, pp. 174-191.
2. FUNCINPEC, French acronym for the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia.
3. Mochtar Kusumaatmadja, *Prospects for Peace in Southeast Asia: An Indonesian Perspective* (Address to the UN 40th Session of the General Assembly, 1985), p. 13.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
5. Incorporating the *Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Viet Nam*, 20 July 1954, the *Agreement of the Cessation of Hostilities in Cambodia*, 20 July 1954, the *Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos 1962*, the *Protocol to the Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos 1962*, and the *Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam 1973*.
6. For example, all factions were involved in landgrabbing operations and political activity among the population to improve the military and political balance in their favor.
7. Yasushi Akashi, *UNTAC in Cambodia: Lessons for UN Peacekeeping*, The Charles Rostov Annual Lecture on Asian Affairs, 14 October 1993.

8. The US General Accounting Office (GAO) noted that UNTAC had "intelligence units." See US GAO Report, *UN Peacekeeping Lessons Learned in Managing Recent Missions*, December 1993. I suggest that this was not the case.

9. See Hugh Smith *Op. Cit.*, p. 179 and also Mats Berdal "Reforming the UN's Organizational Capacity for Peacekeeping" in *A Crisis of Expectations: UN Peacekeeping in the 1990s*, Ed Ramesh Thakur and Carlyle Thayer (Westview Press, Boulder, 1995) p. 184. The United States has installed a Joint Deployable Intelligence Support System in the center.

10. Initially, UNTAC delivered prerecorded tapes to the faction radios and to a Thai-US facility (the USIS VOA service) for twice-daily prime-time broadcasts, before borrowing a transmitter in Phnom Penh in November 1992. In April 1993, one month before elections, UNTAC established its own studios and relay transmitters. See *The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC): Debriefing and Lessons*, Report of the 1994 Singapore Conference. Prepared under direction of Nassrine Azimi, Institute of Policy Studies of Singapore and the UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), p. 39. For a lighter account of the radio's role, see *Radio UNTAC of Cambodia "Winning Ears, Hearts, and Minds,"* Zhou Mei (White Lotus, Bangkok, 1994).

11. Akashi, *Op. Cit.*, p. 5.

